



Cultural Identity and Religious Practice: Challenges for Tibetan Buddhists in China

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Abstract

Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right protected by international law and many national constitutions. In China, the Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, but the implementation of this right, particularly for Tibetan Buddhists, has been complex and controversial. This study aims to analyse how the socio-religious rights of Tibetan Buddhists are ensured in 21st century China, considering current legislation and political realities. The research employs a comprehensive analysis of official legal documents. The historical-systematic method was employed to examine the interrelated sociocultural systems shaping cultural aspects and national identity. The study reveals a complex and evolving relationship between the Chinese state and Tibetan Buddhism. The research identifies state interference in monastic affairs, including restrictions on the size of monastic communities and their political and economic roles. Government attempts to control the reincarnation process of Tibetan Buddhist leaders and the dispute over the selection process for the next Dalai Lama is ongoing, with both the Chinese government and the current Dalai Lama asserting their right to determine the succession. The study notes some instances for compromise, such as the Chinese government's consideration of allowing the current Dalai Lama to visit China and Tibet under certain conditions. The research highlights the need for further studies on the long-term effects of China's religious policies on Tibetan Buddhist culture and identity, as well as the potential for adaptive strategies within the Tibetan Buddhist community in response to these policies.

Keywords: religious freedom, cultural identity, religious policy, state control, reincarnation.

Introduction

Freedom of religion, including the right to freedom of belief and religion, is a fundamental human right protected both at the international level and within the national framework. According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), freedom of



thought, conscience and religion is guaranteed to everyone, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom to manifest any religion in public or private. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights clarifies this principle by emphasising the importance of the right to freedom of religion and its exercise both at the individual and collective level (Kim & Chung, 2025).

In China, the basic norms on freedom of religion are enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982). The state undertakes to protect normal religious activities and to oppose actions that may violate public order or the health of citizens (Podoprigora et al., 2019; de Paula Brito & França, 2024). However, the question of what is considered "normal" religious activity remains in doubt. In recent decades, China has been changing its policy towards religion, which is reflected in a more flexible approach to managing religious affairs. However, restrictions on religious practice, especially concerning certain religious communities, raise concerns among the international community and human rights organisations (The Uighur Muslim minority, The spiritual practice of Falun Gong, Tibetan Buddhists and so on). The Chinese government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. These religions are overseen by state-sanctioned bodies such as the Buddhist Association of China, the Islamic Association of China, and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (for Protestants). Religious groups that operate outside of these state-sanctioned bodies often face restrictions and persecution.

Identity and religion are often closely linked, especially for ethnic minorities such as Tibetans (Ilchuk, 2024; Shershova & Chaika, 2024). Tibetan Buddhism is substantial in shaping the identity of the Tibetan people and is an integral part of local culture and history. The restrictions imposed on Tibetans' religious practice by the Chinese authorities are seen as an attempt to undermine their cultural and religious identity. Thus, despite the guarantees of freedom of religion in China, there are problems and challenges in the field of religious freedom that require attention and regulation (Mercer & Trothen, 2021).

The state of religious freedom in China is the subject of a study by Liu (2024), in which the author emphasises the significant problems of observing the constitutional rights of Tibetan believers. The legal basis for the existence of religious organisations in China and their real impact on society are emphasised by Laliberté (2020) and Wei (2024), whose works illustrate the difference between legislation and the actual policy of the Communist Party towards religion as such in China. The study by Zhai (2023) covers the history of the political system in China since the end of the 20th century in the context of the relationship between the country's party and religious elite. The focus is on the development of management of state institutions in the context of "modernised communism", as well as on the assessment of the effectiveness of the political system in the circumstances of the formation of a new socio-economic system. Li (2020), Travagnin (2019; 2020) and Shmushko (2023) characterised the general aspects of the Chinese Communist Party's religious policy at the present stage.

Fisher (2020) examines the process of self-determination of the Tibetan population in the context of the modern development of Chinese society. The work of Caple (2020) is entirely devoted to this topic, which addresses the social life of China at the present stage, as well as the real size of the influence of religious organisations in society. Jagou (2021) raises the question of the transformation of the idea of Buddhist missionary work in modern Asia. Schak (2020) and Ni (2020) addressed the theological side of Buddhism as a religious movement, paying special attention to the concept of reincarnation. Aspects of the intertwining of religious, ethnic and political factors in the Tibetan issue, as well as the difference in the perception of the role of religious organisations in the eyes of Chinese atheist officials on the one hand and believers on Buddhism on the other, remain unexplored by scholars.

The intricate interplay of religious, ethnic, and political factors in the Tibetan issue, along with the divergent views on the role of religious organizations held by Chinese atheist officials and



Tibetan Buddhists, remains relatively unexplored by scholars due to several interconnected reasons. The high political sensitivity of the topic, both within China and internationally, creates significant barriers to independent and objective research. Access to reliable information and the ability to conduct fieldwork in Tibet are severely limited by the Chinese government's tight control over the region. Additionally, the profound ideological differences between the atheist Chinese Communist Party and Tibetan Buddhists present a complex dynamic that is challenging to analyse.

The study aims to analyse how the socio-religious rights of representatives of Tibetan Buddhism are ensured in China in the 21st century, considering current legislation and political realities. The objectives of this study are to analyse the measures taken by the state to protect and support religious practices; to identify the restrictions and challenges faced by believers and religious leaders, and how these factors affect the social status and cultural expression of Tibetan Buddhists.

Materials and Methods

Official legal documents, including the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982) and laws relating to religious freedom, were used to analyse Chinese policy towards Tibetan Buddhism, such as Article 2 of the Law of the People's Republic of China "On Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations" (1989), the Law of the People's Republic of China "On Regional Ethnic Autonomy" (1984), Article 92 of "The General Provisions of the Civil Law of the People's Republic of China" (2017), and the provision "China's policies and practices on protecting freedom of religious belief" (2018). The texts of these documents were analysed to identify the main norms and provisions relating to Tibetan Buddhism. A comparative analysis of China's regulatory framework governing religious freedom is carried out, with reference to the provisions relating to Tibetan Buddhism. Examples of the practical application of these norms in the context of Tibetan Buddhism in different regions of China were studied. The study assessed the impact of Chinese policy on the practice of Tibetan Buddhism, including an analysis of restrictions and controls on religious practices. The study examined the reactions of Tibetan Buddhists and their public representatives to these restrictions and control measures.

The historical and comparative method was used to conduct a comparative analysis with other regions undergoing similar transformations. Furthermore, the historical and comparative method was used to establish the extent of changes that have affected Tibetan society, both in the political and legal aspects. The study employed the historical-systematic method to systematically examine the interrelated sociocultural systems that shape cultural aspects and national identity. This included economic structures, political ideologies and social institutions. The results show how changes in these systems during the period of communist rule and reform contributed to the dynamic nature of cultural and religious identity in Tibet.

The method of historical periodization facilitated the organisation of historical development into separate periods, which allowed for a systematic analysis of cultural shifts. For example, the method of historical periodization was used to identify differences in the trends of Sino-Tibetan relations before and after the change of party leadership in Beijing in 2012-2013, as well as during the period of active interference by the Chinese authorities in the management of Tibet after 2010. Each period revealed unique challenges and adaptations in the construction of national identity, offering a chronological perspective on the evolution of Tibet's religious and political landscape.



Results and Discussion

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, only Western societies with a Christian heritage have begun to actively study and develop human rights, promoting the principle of equality through the creation of rights available to everyone, regardless of their characteristics (Doss, 2008; Jang, 2020). In contrast to this trend, in Confucian culture and China, the social order is defined in five relationships. When Mao Zedong came to power in China, efforts were made to eliminate the colonial legacy, including religion, through the implementation of the “Religious Freedom Policy” (Li, 2020). As a result, two main views have emerged among Chinese officials and leaders: rejection of the idea of innate rights and changing control over religion depending on the political situation and external relations (Kuanaliyeva et al., 2013).

In the late 1980s, the Tibetan authorities, under the direction of the Chinese government, began to introduce strict measures to control the number of monastic communities in monasteries due to a convergence of political, social, and economic factors (Oostveen, 2020). Primarily, the Chinese government sought to assert greater control over Tibetan religious institutions, which were viewed as potential sources of political dissent and separatist sentiments. By limiting the number of monks and nuns, the authorities aimed to reduce the influence of religious leaders and prevent large-scale religious gatherings that could foster anti-government sentiments. Additionally, the authorities were concerned about the growing number of monastics and the potential for social unrest, as rapid growth in monastic communities could lead to social instability and protests.

However, these measures caused considerable discontent among Tibetans, as restrictions on the age and number of monks and nuns are seen as a serious violation of religious freedom (Cagle, 2020). These actions should be considered in the context of a broader strategy to control religious and political aspects in the region that is not limited to Tibet or China, as reflected in Article 2 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China “On Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations” (1989). Thus, such measures are only part of a more general approach to governance aimed at controlling both monastic communities and religious authorities. Accordingly, the evolution in the policy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) towards Tibetan Buddhism can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The evolution of the PRC policy towards Tibetan Buddhism

Period	Policy features
1950-1960	Tibet’s incorporation into the PRC, secularisation of Buddhist institutions, and control over spiritual leaders.
1970-1980	The period of the Cultural Revolution: repression and persecution of Buddhists, closure and destruction of monasteries, and restrictions on religious practice.
1990s	Gradual easing of policy, return to religious practices, partial restoration of monasteries.
2000s	Continued policy easing, promotion of tourism and development of cultural heritage, but maintaining control over spiritual leaders.
Modernity	Continuing a mixed policy, including support for some aspects of Buddhism in cultural and tourism contexts, while maintaining strict control over religious communities and leaders.

Source: compiled by the authors.

The Table 1 shows that attempts to control reincarnation and religious authorities are part of a broader strategy to consolidate control over Tibet. For instance, the failure of the attempt to replace the 11th Panchen Lama, recognised by the Dalai Lama, with a candidate backed by the Chinese government in 1995, demonstrates the deep divisions and resistance on the part



of Tibetans. In 2009, under Hu Jintao, China ranked fourth on the list of countries with government restrictions on religion, behind only Saudi Arabia, Iran and Uzbekistan, according to Global Restrictions on Religion (2009). In 2014, the Chinese government published a national security report entitled “Blue Book on National Security”, proposing to tighten control over religious issues (NIDS China Security Report..., 2015). This allowed the administration to strengthen its oversight of Tibetan Buddhism.

In 2016, China took a leading position among all countries in the world in terms of the severity of measures taken in the religious sphere (Vilks et al., 2024). Tibetan Buddhism, Islam among the Uyghurs, the banned Falun Gong movement and pressure on unregistered churches for Christians all play an important role in the religious policy of the People’s Republic of China. The restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities are perceived by Tibetans as a threat to their cultural identity. In contrast to the traditional system, where religion and state merged, the Chinese approach to religion as a source of power is causing discontent among Tibetans, as it puts religion in opposition to state power (Lewinski, 2016). China’s religious policy does not support the independence of religious institutions from the Chinese authorities (Leung, 2018). Despite the declared freedom of religion, the actual practice of religion in the country faces several restrictive measures and regulations, including a ban on religious activities outside officially registered facilities and the teaching of religion on behalf of foreign figures. Tibetan Buddhism is particularly subject to control by the Chinese government. In recent years, the state has increasingly integrated control over religion into the system of state governance and party building, which confirms the principle that “the party controls religion” (Table 2).

Table 2. The current state of religious freedom in China about Tibetan Buddhism

The religious freedom aspect	The situation in China regarding Tibetan Buddhism
Freedom of religion	Limited: state policy controls and regulates religious practices, including Tibetan Buddhism. Illegal religious groups may be subject to persecution.
Freedom of worship and ritual	Limited: the government may restrict and regulate public religious events, such as holidays and pilgrimages.
Freedom to influence education and culture	Limited: state policy can influence the content of educational programmes, including the study of religious topics, and control public displays of culture related to Tibetan Buddhism.
Freedom of association and assembly	Limited: the government may restrict or ban the activities of religious communities and organisations, especially if they are seen as a threat to stability or power.
Freedom of expression and dissemination of opinions	Limited: state censorship can control religious literature, Internet resources and other media related to Tibetan Buddhism.

Source: compiled by the authors.

In 2011, at the Fifth Meeting of the Central Committee for Tibetan Affairs, Hu Jintao stressed the importance of the Communist Party of China’s role in the management of Tibetan Buddhism, calling on party members to “fully implement the Party’s basic principles in dealing with religion, abide by laws and regulations concerning the state regulation of religious affairs, and maintain the established order of Tibetan Buddhism in line with its socialist society” (Parker, 2019). Consequently, the diverse understanding of the role of religion, religious institutions and religious leaders among Chinese and Tibetans becomes a source of conflict and complicates the implementation of China’s religious policy towards Buddhism, as demonstrated by Article 92 of The General Provisions of the Civil Law of the People’s Republic of China (2017).



Among the various methods of religious policy, particular attention should be devoted to regulating the process of identifying and training tulku – spiritual leaders who, according to Buddhist beliefs, are reincarnated to carry out spiritual work for the benefit of all beings. In the local tradition, tulku are not elected but are identified and appointed after the death of an influential lama. The identification of a tulku, a reincarnated spiritual leader, is a complex and sacred process that involves recognizing signs left by the deceased lama, consulting oracles and astrologers, forming a search party to find potential candidates, testing these candidates to confirm their authenticity, and finally, formally recognizing and enthroning the chosen candidate. This process is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and emphasizes the continuity of spiritual leadership and the sacred nature of the tulku's role in guiding the community. In some cases, particularly for high-ranking lamas, the final recognition may also involve consultation with other prominent religious figures and, in modern times, may require government approval, especially in regions under Chinese control. Once the reincarnation is identified, the tulku is sent to a monastery for training and further spiritual practice. This represents a logical extension of the strategy to control choice, education, and the restoration of the tulku, based on the Chinese traditional understanding of religion as a competitive force for the central government (Andjić et al., 2019; Caple, 2020).

Past precedents and the roles of the tulku in traditional Tibetan society demonstrate how political factors influence this process (Ashiwa & Wank, 2020; Han, 2022). In the context of the history of relations between China and Tibet, it is necessary to note that after China acquired significant power in the 1950s, attempts were made to establish control over Tibetan affairs, including the election of the tulkus. The control of the reincarnation process by the Chinese authorities dates to the precedent of the 18th century. In 1793, the Qing Empire issued the “Highly Approved Statute for the Restoration of Order in Tibet”, which confirmed Chinese sovereignty over the region (Caple, 2020). In 1992, the Chinese Religious Administration discovered a new reincarnated leader. The XVII Karmapa was officially recognised by the Dalai Lama XIV, but later he expressed his loyalty to the Dalai Lama and criticised Chinese policy in Tibet. This demonstrates the failure of the Chinese authorities to secure the loyalty of the supreme spiritual leader (Caple, 2020).

In May 1995, the Dalai Lama approved the choice of the commission – a boy, Gendun Chokyi Nyima, whose parents were nomads. China's leadership excluded the Dalai Lama from the selection process and established control over the appointment of senior tulku. The Panchen Lama XI became an “exemplary tulku” and was the “right representative” of Tibetan Buddhism in the eyes of the public. At the time of the disappearance, Gendun Chokyi Nyim was 6 years old, while fate remains unknown. The government-appointed Panchen Lama XI is not popular among Tibetans, but he may play a key role in the future search and identification of the next Dalai Lama.

Events at the turn of the late 20th and early 21st century led to increased control by the Chinese government and the introduction of strict rules and restrictions on the search for and recognition of tulku (Seo et al., 2022). On the one hand, the PRC government followed the provisions of Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982), according to which religious organisations and affairs are protected from foreign interference. On the other hand, it has interfered in the process of electing a religious leader, which violates the rights to freedom of religion of the Tibetan people. The Chinese authorities asserted their authority over the choice of tulku in September 2007 by introducing the “Measures on the management of the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism” (2007). This document contains 14 clauses establishing reincarnation procedures. The Chinese government claims the applicant is a legitimate reincarnation. Searching for and identifying reincarnates without approval became illegal (Li, 2020). The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) (the government of Tibetans in exile from 1959) has expressed its outrage over the new document, calling it absurd and unreasonable, and views it as another attempt to suppress



and destroy Tibetan religious culture. Despite the criticism, the current policy continues the course that started in the 1990s and allows the central government to control religious aspects (Dautbayeva-Mukhtarova et al., 2013).

The transformation of complex rituals into bureaucratic procedures highlights the contradiction between the administrative understanding of religion by state authorities and its spiritual significance for Tibetans (Francelino et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022). For example, the Chinese Buddhist Association began the process of issuing certificates to confirmed living Buddhas in 2010. Then in 2016, an online platform was launched containing detailed data on 870 living Buddhas to help distinguish between genuine spiritual leaders and fraudsters. The information includes the official name, monastic rank, date of birth, photograph, affiliation with a religious school, certificate number, and location of the monastery (Parker, 2019). The Chinese government is acting proactively, given the uncertainty surrounding the Dalai Lama's future rebirth.

The consequences of the death of the Dalai Lama XIV may have both religious and political significance. In 2011, the Dalai Lama XIV announced that closer to his 90th birthday (due in 2025), after consultation with the highest lamas of Tibetan Buddhism and the general Tibetan public, he would decide on the continuation of the Dalai Lama line after his death. If he decides not to reincarnate, it will mean "a break in the centuries-old tradition associated with the Dalai Lama". If the line is continued, the Dalai Lama XV will be managed by his Holiness staff, and he will leave clear instructions to this effect. The Dalai Lama also stressed that "only those candidates who are recognised by legal means should be considered reincarnations, and there should be no acceptance of candidates for political purposes, including those in the PRC" (Caple, 2020). It is expected that, like the Dalai Lama XV, the exiled Panchen Lama XI will be influenced by Beijing, which will give the Chinese regime control over Tibetan Buddhism in China.

The issue of controlling the rebirth of Tibetan Buddhist leaders is becoming a cornerstone of religious policy, demonstrating Beijing's sovereignty in Tibet (Kyrychok, 2021). The problem of identifying the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is one of the features of Tibetan Buddhism that is being addressed both in historical scholarship and in contemporary research. Traditionally, a special group of people look for a young boy with certain characteristics after the death of the previous Dalai Lama (Anđić et al., 2022). As a result of his discovery and recognition, he is accepted by the faithful as the new Dalai Lama. This is how the current Dalai Lama XIV, Tenzin Gyatso, was found (Hardie, 2022; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 2002; Shmushko, 2022).

The Indian permission to settle in Dharamsala allowed the creation of the Tibetan government in exile, which sought to aggravate the Tibetan problem and received the support of the international community. The Dalai Lama's entourage insists on the independence of Tibet, which they believe was forcibly annexed to China in 1951. Tibet is now fighting for broad autonomy within China (Caple, 2020). The Chinese leadership's view is that Tibet has been part of China since the 13th century. The issue of the Dalai Lama fate has acquired serious political significance (Shen, 2022; ter Haar, 2021). The Central Tibetan Administration insists that the choice of a new incarnation should be made exclusively within the religious framework, without political interference (Li, 2023).

Chinese researchers point out that some Dalai Lamas were approved through an agreement between the leadership of the Gelug Buddhist school and officials of the Qing dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the "Golden Urn Principle" was introduced, a procedure for selecting candidates for the role of Dalai Lama by drawing lots using a Golden Urn, which became the legal way to determine a successor among the "living Buddhas". The tradition of electing the Dalai Lama included the procedure of removing the plates with the names of the candidates from the Golden Urn, which was then confirmed by the emperor. This is how the 10th, 11th and 12th Dalai Lama were chosen (Greenspan & Tarocco, 2020).



Experts analyse the current situation and note that the revival of the tradition of selecting lamas using the Golden Vase is a step taken by China to prepare for the selection of the next Dalai Lama. This mechanism can become a way of determining the future spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, causing heated discussions and disputes both inside and outside China (Bocheliuk et al., 2022). The complexity of the situation is increasing in the context of the Dalai Lama XIV's authority and worldwide recognition, as well as his importance for the future of Tibetan Buddhism (Fisher, 2020; Newsom, 2020). On the other hand, the Chinese government asserts its right to interfere in the process of choosing the future Dalai Lama, which causes outrage and protests from the Tibetan people and their supporters around the world. The Chinese government bases its claimed "right" to interfere in the process of choosing the future Dalai Lama primarily on its assertion of sovereignty over Tibet, maintaining that Tibet has been an inalienable part of China since the 13th century, and therefore, religious matters in Tibet fall under its territorial integrity and administrative control. The question of how the next Dalai Lama will be selected and how this will affect the future of Tibet and relations between China and the international community remains open and requires further study. Despite radical differences in opinion on the procedure for finding and approving reincarnation, both sides do not rule out the possibility of finding a compromise, as has happened in the past. For instance, after the Dalai Lama left for India, Chinese leaders repeatedly invited him to return and retained the position of deputy chairman of the People's Republic of China Committee, which he had received in the 1950s (Abdraim et al., 2013). After Deng Xiaoping's reforms, representatives of the Dalai Lama were allowed to visit Tibet multiple times to familiarise themselves with the situation and possibly return the Dalai Lama to Lhasa.

Under the leadership of China's current leader Xi Jinping, there were also ideas for reform in the sphere of religion (Spytska, 2023b). This may indicate that the Chinese authorities are willing to find compromises and seek ways to improve relations with the Tibetan people and their religious leaders. Nevertheless, the current situation remains complex, and the conflict between Chinese and Tibetan leaders continues to evolve (Kanybekovna et al., 2020). However, history shows that there have been moments of rapprochement and compromise in the past, which may give hope for a peaceful solution to this conflict in the future (Liu, 2024). It is noted that the Dalai Lama also expressed a positive attitude towards the new Chinese leadership's desire to review the situation in Tibet. Currently, the Chinese government is considering allowing the Dalai Lama to visit China and Tibet, provided that he completely renounces the idea of Tibetan independence (Spytska, 2023a).

The warming of relations between Buddhist leaders and the CCP leadership is evidenced by the provision of China's policies and practices on protecting freedom of religious belief (2018), which contains more lenient requirements for restricting the autonomy of religious organisations (Akimzhanov et al., 2021). It is important to note that, according to R. Thurman, who often communicated with the Dalai Lama, the religious authority of Tibetan Buddhism did not make statements about the need to fight for the independence of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Administration from China. His position has always been to seek true Tibetan autonomy within the PRC (Brunz & Schedneck, 2020). It is also worth noting that a visit by the Dalai Lama to Tibet could help to reach an agreement between him and the Chinese authorities on the process of determining his future reincarnation. However, this complicated circumstance of choosing a new Dalai Lama is further complicated by India's involvement in the process of determining his future incarnation. China and India have disputed territories on their border, including Tawang, the birthplace of the late Dalai Lama VI. Tawang is an important place of worship for Buddhists, with the Dalai Lama XIV making several pilgrimages there. The study assumed that there is a region outside of China where one of the previous Dalai Lamas had previously appeared, and where a new incarnation could theoretically appear. Based on the positions and opinions of the Dalai Lama XIV and the Chinese authorities on the issue of his future reincarnation, several scenarios can be identified (Slobodnik, 2011; Lee & Chung, 2025).



The Chinese government is pursuing a strategy of influencing the process of determining the new reincarnation and is confident in its ability to select a suitable candidate for the role of the future Dalai Lama after the death of the current one, which will help solve the so-called Tibetan problem (the ongoing political and religious tensions and separatist sentiments in Tibet) and end the Dalai Lama's institution of reincarnation. At the same time, the Panchen Lama will play a significant role in the selection and education of the new Dalai Lama, which will allow him to control his activities in the interest of strengthening the unity of the state. In turn, China is interested in the fact that the institution of lamas and the political position of the Dalai Lama in Tibet are the result of the influence of the Chinese government, which inherited the right to regulate religious events from the Qing emperors (Trusova et al., 2020). Although Chinese leaders sometimes show flexibility in their approach, their goal appears to be to complete the tradition of reincarnating the Dalai Lama after the current leader's death. In the history of Tibet, there are examples of the Lama's policy of modernisation and strengthening their power in the region, as well as support for opposition forces, which caused dissatisfaction with the Chinese rulers. Although some Dalai Lamas have friendly relations with Chinese rulers, the situation with the Dalai Lama XIV is different. The Qing Dynasty gave the Dalai Lama XV an honorific title and support, but the Dalai Lama XIV has been in exile since 1959 because of deep political and ideological differences with the Chinese government. The relationship between the lamas and the Chinese central authorities has changed numerous times. The Dalai Lama XIV found himself in conflict with the Chinese central government after departing Tibet and spreading anti-Chinese propaganda overseas (Williams-Oerberg & Brox, 2020; Yang, 2020).

Given the possibility of the Chinese government gaining full control over the Dalai Lama's reincarnation and its goal of destroying the institution of lamas, it is important to consider that the Chinese government was uncertain about the reaction of Buddhist followers. It is important to note the factor of rejection by Tibetans of direct government interference in the process of reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and the election of a new Dalai Lama after his death, especially if he has indicated his future place of birth. With the CTA under the rule of its Dalai Lama and increased autonomy for Tibet, other ethnic and religious groups in China may also demand similar rights, threatening the country's integrity (Spytska, 2024). However, to pacify the Tibetan population, the Chinese government did not reject the possibility of the current Dalai Lama's visit to the country, which was in line with the CCP's new strategy of compromise on the part of the Chinese central authorities. Beijing noted the possibility of parallel coexistence of two Dalai Lamas (in China and abroad). According to the Chinese leadership, the tradition of determining the reincarnations of "living Buddhas" is clearly a unique aspect of Tibetan Buddhism, and it must be observed following religious ritual and historically established rules, where the final decision is made by representatives of the Chinese leadership after the selection procedure using the Golden Vase (Laliberté, 2020). However, the Dalai Lama and his supporters insisted that the determination of the new Dalai Lama should be made solely by religious institutions, such as the process of recognizing the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, in 1995, which was conducted by the Dalai Lama without Chinese government involvement. Possible new solutions are also suggested, including gender and territorial aspects, up to the abolition of the Dalai Lama's institution. Moreover, the institution of the Dalai Lama first emerged in the 16th century, as a result of the Mongol Khan's conferring the title and privileges of power on a representative of the Geluk school, which was the most influential in Tibetan Buddhism.

Conclusions

The religious policy pursued by the People's Republic of China concerning Tibetan Buddhism has had a significant impact on local monasteries. State restrictions imposed on their political and economic role, as well as on the size of monastic communities, caused substantial



changes in the life and functioning of these sacred sites. Today, the state of monastic Buddhism in Tibet is radically different from what it was in the past.

It should also be noted that the rapid changes taking place in various spheres of public life in Tibet and China would inevitably affect the nature of monasteries, even if religious policy remained unchanged. However, it is the official approach to religion, which reduces it to the sphere of spiritual matters, that has accelerated this process of change. The conflicting views of China and Tibet on the role of religion and its institutions in society have become a source of confrontation and conflict. This harms China's overall policy in Tibet, where religious policy plays an important, albeit small, role. It should also be noted that the Dalai Lama is being cautious and prudent about the future process of choosing his reincarnation. His statements that reincarnation can take place in different forms and places, and not just according to the Chinese government's preferences, indicate his desire to maintain independence in this matter. This may also be an attempt to prevent interference or control by the Chinese authorities in the selection of his successor. Currently, the role and significance of the reincarnation process have been repeatedly revisited by the Chinese government and Tibetan Buddhist leaders. However, despite the developments during the search for and approval of the tulku of the now-healthy Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, the existence and prosperity of Tibetan culture is unthinkable without this fundamental Buddhist institution.

One of the key limitations of this study is the availability of data and information about the real situation in Tibet due to the certain secrecy of Beijing's internal policy. Limited access to this information can make it difficult to analyse and understand the full range of religious practices and their impact on public life objectively. In addition, it should be noted that the volatile political situation in China introduces additional difficulties in studying the long-term trends and effects of religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism. Further research could focus on the mechanisms of adaptation of Tibetan religious practice to the changing political environment, as well as the impact of religious policy on social stability and cultural heritage in the region.

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